

ARTICLE

Slouching towards Caracas, Venezuela: Contested Fishermen's Identities during the 2025 U.S. Bombings in the Southern Caribbean

Oliver Antczak¹  and Fidel Rodríguez Velásquez^{2,3} 

¹Archaeology, University of Cambridge, UK; ²Centro de Investigaciones Históricas Antropológicas y Culturales, Panama and ³History, Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Corresponding author: Fidel Rodríguez Velásquez; Email: frodriguez@cihac.org.pa

(Received 09 January 2026; revised 03 February 2026; accepted 04 February 2026)

Abstract

This article investigates the 2025 U.S. bombing campaign in the Southern Caribbean and the contested identity of its victims. Situated between Washington's "narcoterrorist" branding and Caracas's "humble fisherman" idealisation, the study employs a long-term archaeological and historical perspective to critique these binary tropes. By using digital ethnography to synthesise social media discourse and combining it with heritage research, we demonstrate how the manipulation of fishermen's identities served to legitimise a military intervention primarily driven by oil interests, and we propose the idea of "Schrödinger's Fishermen" to illustrate both the agency of local fishermen and the propensity of the fishermen's identity for use by both political narratives. The analysis reveals that these identity politics obscured regional agency and facilitated extrajudicial violence, resulting in 51 fatalities across the region.

Keywords: fisherman identity; narcoterrorism; Southern Caribbean; U.S. military intervention; Venezuela

In the lead-up to the U.S. attack on Venezuela on January 3, 2026, leadership in Washington justified its military mobilisation by alleging widespread drug trafficking from the Caribbean nation into the United States. As U.S. naval forces amassed just north of Venezuela's coastline in an operation designated as "Southern Spear," American warships began bombing civilian vessels in the waters of the Southern Caribbean. A total of 51 people were killed in the Caribbean across the strikes that we have mapped in [Figure 1](#), according to data from various news sources.¹ By tracing the history of Southern Caribbean fishing identities and critically responding to their instrumentalisation during this crisis, this article contributes to wider debates on heritage, memory, and reparatory justice.

Before the 2025–2026 tensions in the region, our research focused on the history and heritage of the islands of Venezuela, as well as neighbouring sister islands that belong to the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao) and Trinidad and Tobago. We

¹ Robertson 2026; The Associated Press 2025.

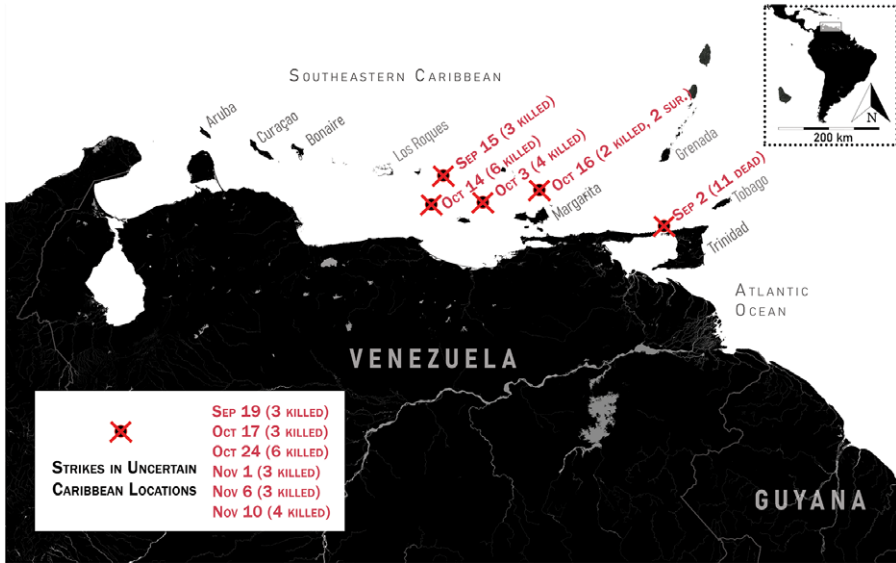


Figure 1. Locations of U.S. bombings in the Southern Caribbean in 2025. *Source:* Compiled by authors from various sources with map data from JAXA 2018.

have lived in the region and worked closely with their inhabitants, many of whom are fishers. Therefore, it was with great concern that we followed these events, which violently targeted the very communities and spaces we have shared. A key characteristic of this bombing campaign by the United States that raised much discussion online was the extrajudicial and decisive killing of the victims; the boats were blown up by powerful bombs, leaving no one alive to speak for or against the accusations of “narcoterrorism.” In fact, the bombing on the September 2, 2025 allegedly consisted of a “double tap” where survivors hanging onto the boat were killed with a subsequent missile, ensuring the silence of the victims.² The only witnesses were grainy videos that flooded social media; often a bird’s-eye view of a ship speeding over waves, and suddenly a flare of pure white as the boat stutters and becomes fully engulfed in flames.

With purposive qualitative sampling framed within a digital ethnographic method, we began collecting data (screenshots and videos) to understand online discourses and social media trends across X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Reddit. This revealed a “tug-of-war” as to the nature of the bombed victims: were they “narcoterrorists” as the U.S. leaders claimed, or instead “humble fishermen” as alleged by Venezuelan government officials (see Figure 2)? This tug-of-war did not emerge in a vacuum. Long before the U.S. strikes, Venezuelan coastal governance had already oscillated between neglect and securitised intervention, making maritime livelihoods intermittently precarious and suspect. The Venezuelan state’s rationing of gasoline for civilian boat engines exerted continuous pressure on who was allowed to be a “fisherman” and who was totally immobilised.³ Analysing these antecedents and online discourses (see Figure 3), we soon realised that our work on the heritage and identity of fishing communities in Margarita, Venezuela, gave insight into the political uses of this identity as the conflict heated up.

² Power 2026.

³ Medina 2024.

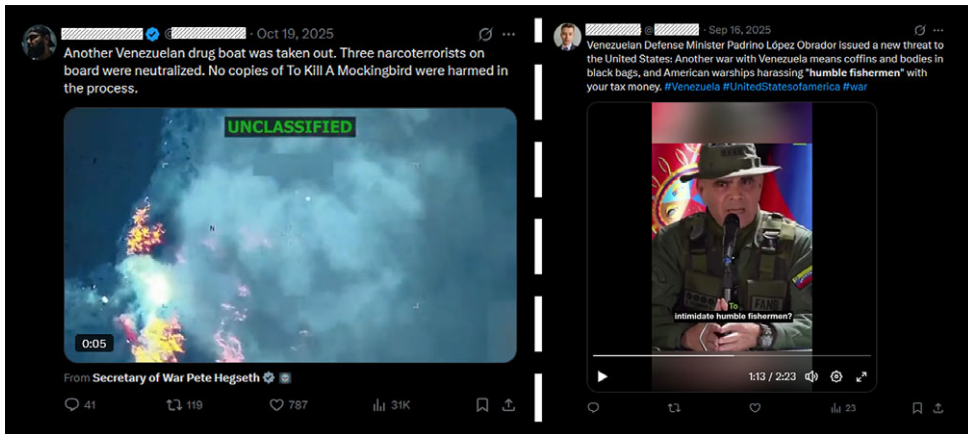


Figure 2. Examples of the discourses from two sides on X, on the left, accusations of “narcoterrorism” while sharing a video of a bombing, on the right, the Venezuelan Defence Minister asks if it is worth using bombs costing millions of dollars on “humble fishermen.” Source: Collected by authors.

In a recent conference presentation in Leiden, the Netherlands, we argued for a “millenary history” of fishing in the Southeastern Caribbean, arguing that such a phenomenon could reparatively conceive of continuities in a region ruptured by colonial violence, borders, and Indigenous erasure. By surveying archaeological, historic, and anthropological data, we drew a unified concept of how fishing has left a lasting and uninterrupted mark on the region over millennia of human occupation.

From the first humans in the region (about 7000 BP Banwari Trace, Trinidad) who relied on marine resources and left us with large middens of shells as evidence, we tracked similarities with the current-day renewed practice of *chipi chipi* (*Donax variabilis*) and *pepitona* (*Arca zebra*) harvesting to deal with economic hardship in Margarita, Venezuela.⁴ These parallels result in nearly identical shell middens separated physically by only a few hundred metres, but temporally by thousands of years. We further argued that the social implications of the Indigenous *ranchería* practices underlie the development of early colonial enterprises like the pearl exploitation of Nueva Cádiz de Cubagua and eventually the sailing fame of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Bonaireans.⁵ The practice of fishing has, therefore, kept the region interconnected, for example, in the spreading of the cult of the *Virgen del Valle* and has co-participated in practices that have crisscrossed the region, such as salt, guano, and timber extraction.⁶ Throughout millennia and into the present, the movements enabled by fishing have actively defied laws and borders; trade, ideas, and peoples have all travelled, and continue travelling legally and illegally as aspects of an important traditional practice. In the Venezuelan case, this has additionally meant navigating selective enforcement and militarised coastal control, where the line between “traditional mobility” and “illicit circulation” is frequently produced through arbitrary state practices.

To our eyes, a connection between the U.S. bombings and this history is evident in the diversity of victims on board the targeted boats. The October 14th strike included two Trinidadians on board alongside Venezuelans, the September 15th strike included one

⁴ Harris 1973.

⁵ Antczak 2024; Antczak et al. 2019, 146–74; Rodríguez Velásquez and Antczak 2023.

⁶ Antczak 2019; Rodríguez Velásquez 2022.

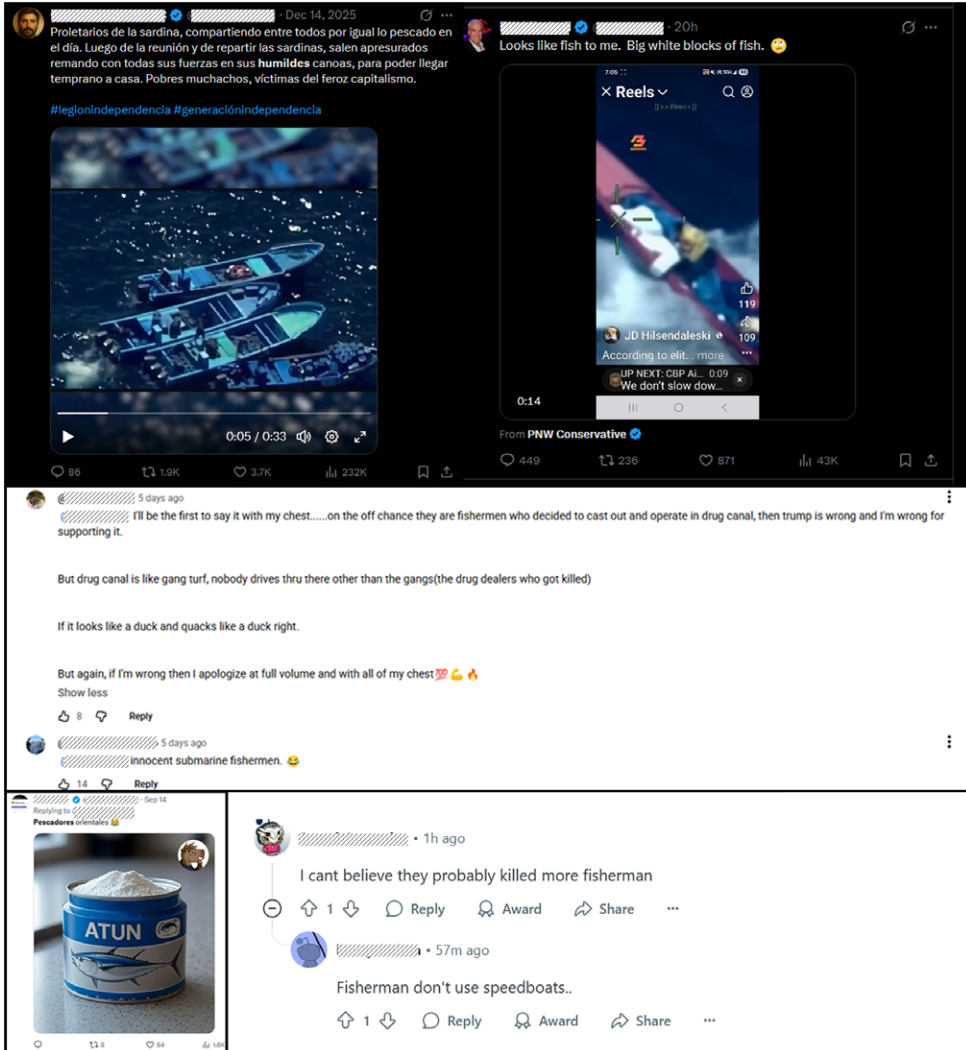


Figure 3. Discourse collected from different social media platforms: X (formerly Twitter), YouTube and Reddit. Source: Collected by authors.

Colombian on board, and the October 3rd strike was said to include Colombians on board as well.⁷ On the 16th of October, strikes killed two on board a ship in the Caribbean, but two survivors were repatriated by the United States to Colombia and Ecuador, where both countries countered the accusations of drug trafficking directed at the victims.⁸ Today's motley crews criss-crossing the region in defiance of laws and borders find resonance across centuries of practice in the region.

By tracing the heritage of the regionally important fishing identity, we argue that we are helping return agency to those targeted and victimised by the brutal bombing campaigns.

⁷ Romero 2026; Stacey 2025.

⁸ Buschschlüter 2025.

The historic mobilities and lifestyles of the region form an ideal staging ground for identity claims underlying decision-making by both U.S. and Venezuelan government observers. We propose an analogy to help illustrate the point. Schrödinger's cat is a well-known physics thought experiment which illustrates the quantum mechanics phenomenon where a radioactive atom is in two states at once: decayed and not decayed.⁹ If observed, it will switch to one of those two states; otherwise, it is in both states at the same time. As with Schrödinger's experiment, when looking into current mobilities and practices of the region, the observer fixes a reality into one of two polarities, which in fact are always intermingled. In political and online discourse (see Figure 3), these victims are either "narcoterrorists" or "humble fishermen," though the truth is a much more complex and situational "Schrödinger's Fisherman," existing firmly between these two extremes. This view is supported by journalistic work, which has pointed away from Venezuela as a significant supplier of drugs to the United States, and by tracing victims back to their families, has noted how drug smuggling, fishing, and odd jobs are part of life and far from the charges of "narcoterrorism."¹⁰ Additionally, the survivors of the 15th of September bombing were exonerated in their countries, and the families of Trinidadian victims have since sued the U.S. government, claiming their innocence, casting further doubt on the culpability and cartel membership of the victims.¹¹

The polarised framing, "narcoterrorists" versus "humble fishermen," is a struggle over legibility in which both states speak *about* fishermen rather than treating them as historical subjects. U.S. securitisation criminalises through annihilation, while Venezuelan official discourse absolves through idealisation, turning fishermen into symbols and obscuring longer histories of agency, governance, neglect, and selective criminalisation. These moves are not morally or materially equivalent, but they are analytically connected through the politics of identity and classification. This polarisation is further enforced by the media shared by both sides and by social media discourse emanating from it. In contrast to the viral images of bombed boats (see Figure 2), Figure 4 shows fishermen as they would like to be seen, gathered here in the celebration of the Virgen del Valle in 2022.

Outside of the reach of state "observers," the fishers of the Southern Caribbean engage in activities that oscillate between the extremes of "humble fisherman" and "narcoterrorist." One illustrative example came during one of our fieldwork campaigns in Trinidad and Tobago in 2023, when we travelled to watch nesting leatherback turtles. Several Venezuelan *tres puño* ships on extended fishing campaigns were spending the night in the bay, and as we walked along the beach past midnight, we noticed Margariteno Spanish mixing with the Trini English. We were suddenly joined by families who had come from the ships to watch the turtles with us. These simple acts that defy rigid borders are just one example of the historic realities of a survival economy in the region, contemporary expressions of a long-standing maritime livelihood. This was already noted in the late eighteenth century by Fray Íñigo Abbad y Lasierra, who described Caribbean islanders as those who "are very prone to sailing, seeking at sea the means of subsistence that the land denies them; and thus they are smugglers by trade, fishermen by necessity, and privateers by inclination."¹² Read against contemporary regimes of surveillance and criminalisation, Abbad's observation underscores the historical continuity of maritime mobility as necessity rather than deviance, an ambivalence that persists into the present.

⁹ Schrödinger 1935.

¹⁰ See Garcia Cano 2025; Glatky and Correal 2026; Romero 2026

¹¹ Stacey 2025

¹² Abbad y Lasierra 1974.



Figure 4. Fishermen celebrate the day of the Virgen del Valle in Margarita, Venezuela. *Source:* Photo courtesy of Diego Torres Pantin.

The conflict has since escalated into the first attack on Venezuelan soil on the December 26, 2025, which targeted an alleged drug loading dock, the seizure of oil tankers that same month, and eventually the bombings of key sites in the capital Caracas and the capture of Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro by U.S. forces on the January 3, 2026. The future for Venezuela is uncertain for the coming months and years. Notably, in U.S. President Donald Trump's first speech after the capture of Maduro, the matter of drug-trafficking seemed to take a backseat compared to the aim of seizing control over Venezuela's oil reserves. This new explicit focus casts a clearer light on the key role the manipulations of fishermen's identities played in forming a "narcoterrorist" threat in the buildup to the military action, despite the realities on the ground, or more accurately, on the sea.

Oliver Antczak is Teaching Associate in Heritage Studies at the University of Cambridge and College Teaching Associate in Archaeology and Bye-Fellow at Downing College. Oliver is also an Associate Researcher with the Unidad de Estudios Arqueológicos, Universidad Simón Bolívar. Oliver's research focuses heritage and identity processes on the islands of the Southern Caribbean and he co-leads a project into the history and heritage of the region called *Gente de Mar*.

Fidel Rodríguez Velásquez is a Researcher at the Centro de Investigaciones Históricas Antropológicas y Culturales (CIHAC AIP), Panama, and FAPERJ postdoctoral Fellow at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Fidel is also an Associate Researcher with the Unidad de Estudios Arqueológicos, Universidad Simón Bolívar, and the Museo Marino de Margarita. Fidel's research focuses on the early modern history of the Southern Caribbean, and he co-leads a project into the history and heritage of the region called *Gente de Mar*.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: O.A.; F.R.V.

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare no competing interests.

References

- Abbad y Lasierra, Íñigo. 1974. *Diario del viaje a la América (1772–1774)*, edited by Ernesto Armitano. Armitano.
- Antczak, Konrad A. 2019. *Islands of Salt: Historical Archaeology of Seafarers and Things in the Venezuelan Caribbean, 1624–1880*. Sidestone Press.
- Antczak, Oliver. 2024. “Indigenous Identity Gender and Colonialism in Bonaire.” In *Handbook of Gender Studies in the Dutch Caribbean*, edited by Rose Mary Allen, and Sruti Bala. Brill.
- Antczak, Andrzej T., Ma. Magdalena Antczak, Oliver Antczak, and Luis A. L. Buffet. 2019. “Rancherías: Historical Archaeology of Early Colonial Campsites on Margarita and Coche Islands, Venezuela.” In *Material Encounters and Indigenous Transformations in the Early Colonial Americas*, edited by Corinne L. Hofman and Floris W. M. Keehnen, 146–74. Brill.
- Buschschlüter, Vanessa. 2025. “Ecuador Releases Survivor of US Strike on “drug Sub” in Caribbean.” *BBC News*, October 21, 2025. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn97v17vy7xo>.
- Garcia Cano, Regina. 2025. “Trump Has Accused Boat Crews of Being Narco-Terrorists. The Truth, AP Found, Is More Nuanced.” *AP News*, November 7, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/trump-venezuela-boat-strikes-drugs-cocaine-trafficking-95b54a3a5efec74f12f82396a79617ea>.
- Glatzky, Genevieve, and Annie Correal. 2026. “The U.S. Indictment of Maduro Cites Cocaine Smuggling, Venezuela’s Role in the Trade Is Believed to Be Modest.” *The New York Times*, January 4, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/03/world/americas/venezuela-drug-trade.html>.
- Harris, Peter. 1973. “Preliminary Report on Banwari Trace, a Pre-ceramic Site in Trinidad.” In *Proceedings of the Fourth International Congress for the Study of Pre-Columbian Cultures of the Lesser Antilles*, 115–25. St. Lucia Archaeological and Historical Society.
- Medina, Frank. 2024. “Unas 500 embarcaciones pesqueras están varadas por falta de gasolina en Nueva Esparta.” *TalCual Digital*, octubre 14, 2024. <https://talcualdigital.com/unas-500-embarcaciones-pesqueras-estan-varadas-por-falta-de-gasolina-en-nueva-esparta/>.
- Power, John. “US Lawmakers Urge Release of Video of Double-Tap Boat Strike in Caribbean.” *Al Jazeera*, January 9, 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/8/us-lawmakers-urge-release-of-video-of-double-tap-boat-strike-in-caribbean>.
- Robertson, Khalea. 2026. “Timeline: U.S. Military Ramp-Up in the Caribbean Culminates in Capture of Maduro | AS/COA.” Americas Society/Council of the Americas, January 7, 2026. <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/time-line-us-military-ramp-caribbean-culminates-capture-maduro>.
- Rodríguez Velásquez, Fidel. 2022. “Navegantes indígenas, perlas y canoas en el Caribe del siglo XVI.” *Trabajos y Comunicaciones* 55. <https://doi.org/10.24215/23468971e161>.
- Rodríguez Velásquez, Fidel, and Oliver Antczak. 2023. “Nueva Cádiz de Cubagua and the Pearl Fisheries of the Caribbean.” In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.1186>.
- Romero, Laura. 2026. “Families of 2 Trinidadian nationals killed in strikes sue Trump administration.” *ABC News*, January 27, 2026. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/families-2-trinidadian-nationals-killed-strikes-sue-trump/story?id=129608509>.
- Schrödinger, Erwin. 1935. “The Present Status of Quantum Mechanics.” *Die Naturwissenschaften* 23 (48): 807–12.
- Stacey, Diego. 2025. “La familia del pescador colombiano asesinado en un bombardeo en el Caribe presenta una denuncia contra Estados Unidos ante la CIDH.” *El País América Colombia*, December 3, 2025. <https://elpais.com/america-colombia/2025-12-02/la-familia-del-pescador-colombiano-asesinado-en-un-bombardeo-en-el-caribe-presenta-una-denuncia-contra-estados-unidos-ante-la-cidh.html>.
- The Associated Press. 2025. “U.S. Sending Survivors of Strike on Alleged ‘Drug-Carrying Submarine’; Back to South America, Trump Says.” *CBC News*, October 18, 2025. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/us-boat-strike-caribbean-survivors-ecuador-colombia-9.6944133>.

Cite this article: Antczak, Oliver, and Fidel Rodríguez Velásquez. 2026. “Slouching towards Caracas, Venezuela: Contested Fishermen’s Identities during the 2025 U.S. Bombings in the Southern Caribbean.” *Public Humanities*, 2, e25, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10140>